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9-1-1 called, but no one's home Latest example of cellphone incompatibility

By SCOTT STEEPLTON NEWS-PRESS CITY EDITOR

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Problems with the state's beleaguered emergency 9-1-1 system continue to mount, with officials reporting yet another instance of rescue crews in Santa Barbara being sent to the wrong address because a woman seeking help for her ill mother used a cellphone to call 9-1-1.

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The problem is the system doesn't recognize a cellphone's location.

Meanwhile, the state board charged with doing something about misrouted emergency cellphone calls released the minutes of a recent meeting sanitized of any input from local experts about how a misrouted cellphone call is believed to have contributed to the death of a Santa Barbara woman one year ago.

In a telephone interview Thursday, Dr. Angelo Salvucci, medical director for emergency medical services agencies in Santa Barbara and Ventura counties, told the News-Press that he was surprised to see the minutes from the November meeting of the Governor's Office of Emergency Services State 9-1-1 Advisory Board aren't exactly thorough.

For at that meeting in Sacramento, Dr. Salvucci along with retired Santa Barbara Fire Chief Warner McGrew spoke about Jordan Soto, who lived less than a mile from both a fire station and Santa Barbara Cottage Hospital, but whose location on that fateful day in January 2014 was difficult for responders to pinpoint because of cellphone incompatibility with the 9-1-1 system.

"I wish I could say yes, something has changed," Dr. Salvucci said. "But in fact, I haven't heard a word from the 9-1-1 program manager."

Then he said this: "They released the minutes of that meeting in November and they don't mention my comments or include my written statements at all."

Indeed, the minutes for the agenda item referred to as "Wireless Routing" sum up comments by several board members, but say nothing of the public comments.

Dr. Salvucci and Mr. McGrew made the trip to Sacramento that day to make the board aware of the problems caused by cellphone incompatibility, specifically through the sad tale of 24-year-old Ms. Soto.

In her case, the medical response team didn't arrive at her home until 20 minutes after the initial 9-1-1 call, which was made from a cellphone.

She died later that day.

A complaint filed in Santa Barbara County Superior Court on behalf of her parents and young son alleges wrongful death and gross negligence on the part of various entities, including the 9-1-1 Advisory Board, for failing to maintain the emergency call service.

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Board director Karen Wong is personally named in the complaint.

Ms. Soto is not the only person who may have died because of

9-1-1. In January, an eighth-grade boy in the Kern County town of Delano died after a 9-1-1 call from the middle school where he collapsed was misrouted to Canada.

According to the Bakersfield Californian, the 9-1-1 call made by a school employee the morning of Jan. 26 was answered by Ontario, Canada-based Northern911, a private company that provides emergency call routing to several fire departments and emergency service providers - in Canada.

Not only was it misrouted when it came from Northern911 to the Delano Police Department, the call came from a Northern911 employee to the department's main, non-emergency line, said Delano Police Department Cmdr. Raul Alvizo.

The caller had to navigate the "automated attendant," a recorded voice greeting, before making it to the emergency dispatchers.

Why the call for help was misrouted to the Canadian company is a question even local experts can't seem to answer definitively, the paper wrote.

Not all 9-1-1 misroutes have such tragic endings.

Dr. Salvucci said a woman visiting her mother in Santa Barbara recently called 9-1-1 to get her mother some help. The call was routed to the CHP, and then it was disconnected.

"Fortunately, she had the wherewithal to pick up her mother's land line and call 9-1-1," he said.

The call went to the right place, the correct address popped up for the dispatchers and help was on the way.

"In the meantime," Dr. Salvucci said, "the CHP dispatch center called the cell carrier to try to find the address (of the cellphone user) and got the address."

The caller, however, was at her mother's home.

Authorities relayed the caller's address to the fire department, "but the fire department was dispatched to the wrong house," he said.

"They forcibly entered the house, trying to find the medical emergency. Of course, there was no one there."

"The city got a request to repair the broken door," said Dr. Salvucci. "The only way this ever came to light is because of a claim for the broken door."

"So, the state 9-1-1 office that says that everything is OK has no flipping idea what's really going on," he said.

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